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UNCLAS HANOI 000676

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV, DS/DSS/ITA, AND DS/OP/EAP

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL ASEC IZ VM

SUBJECT: PRO-PEACE RALLY AT EMBASSY

REF: HANOI 0651 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. (U) During the afternoon of March 19, a group of approximately 30 school-age children (apparently in their early teens at the oldest) suddenly appeared at the front of the Chancery chanting -- in English -- "peace for Iraq" and "no war," and holding up a few pro-peace posters (also in English). One student presented one poster subsequently to RSO, and expressed Vietnam's wish for peace in light of its own experiences with war. According to some in the crowd, the demonstrators were all students at Ngo Si Lien School.

¶2. (U) Within a few minutes of the beginning of the demonstration, several dozen additional local police arrived on the scene and moved the protesters to the sidewalk across the street from the Embassy. They did not otherwise try to break up the demonstration and instead stood facing them, and helping to direct traffic. Crowds of onlookers quickly outnumbered the students but did not join in the chanting. A few passers-by on motorcycle raised their fists when they saw the demonstrators, apparently in support.

¶3. (U) One older man, apparently not connected with the students and apparently drunk or on drugs, took off his shirt, cut himself, and tried to spread his blood on shrubs and the ground. Police restrained him and eventually took him into custody.

¶4. (U) The student protesters remained on the scene for about one hour. As far as Embassy knows, none were detained or taken into custody. Several photographers, both still and videocam, covered the protest. Embassy expects press coverage on the evening television news March 19 and in newspapers on March 20.

¶5. (U) Comment: Unlike the well-staged "mass" rallies and demonstrations (ref), this event appears to have been slightly more spontaneous (even if still orchestrated by school teachers and authorities) than the norm for Vietnam. We expect the number and intensity of these protests to grow as military action against Iraq grows more imminent and after the offset of any hostilities. We continue to expect that Vietnamese security officials will keep these demonstrations well under control, however.

BURGHARDT